



JOURNAL OF THE SINGAPORE ARMED FORCES

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## The Battle of Pasir Panjang Revisited

*by Mr Lim Choo Hoon*

*On 15 February 2002, the long awaited World War II Interpretative Centre at Pepys Road was opened to the public.<sup>1</sup> The centre is located in a pre-war building where the last battles of Singapore at the Pasir Panjang Ridge were fought 60 years ago. In these battles, units of the Malay Regiment defended Point 226 gallantly against the Japanese 18<sup>th</sup> Division troops' attack. The opening of the exhibition centre was timed to commemorate the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the fall of Singapore on 15 February 1942.*

*The question of the importance of the Battle of Pasir Panjang and the Malay Regiment has been a controversial one. British military histories provide very little details about this battle. Even the official British historian Woodburn Kirby has only a scant description of the battle.<sup>2</sup> The only British official who commented favourably on the battle and the Malay Regiment was General A. E. Percival, the Commander-in-Chief of the Malayan Command. Commenting after the war, Percival remarked :*

*"When war broke out in the Far East, the (Malay) Regiment was in process of expansion like many other units of our Imperial Force, (it) was not fully prepared for the ordeal which it was to face. Nevertheless, these young and untried soldiers acquitted themselves in a way which bore comparison with the very best troops in Malaya. In particular, by their stubborn defence of the Pasir Panjang Ridge at the height of the Battle of Singapore, they set an example of steadfastness and endurance which will become a great tradition in the Regiment and an inspiration for the future generations."<sup>3</sup>*

*Even for the Japanese, most accounts of the Malayan Campaign in World War II have ignored the Battle of Pasir Panjang completely.<sup>4</sup>*

*Historians in this region, on the other hand, treated the Malay Regiment and the Battle of Pasir Panjang quite differently from their western and Japanese counterparts. They felt that it was one of the fiercest battles fought before Singapore fell and the great sacrifices by officers and men of the Malay Regiment to fight to the last marked the highest form of "honour, duty, and courage" for the professional armed forces.<sup>5</sup>*

*Who were these Malay Regiment units? How important was this battle to the British? Was the Malay Regiment, one of the smallest units of the British forces, deserving of such attention in this battle? And, in what ways can we justify that the event and the battle site are worth remembering and publicising? This article hopes to look at these questions.*

### The Malay Regiment Prior to 1941

The Malay Regiment was the only local regular unit maintained and financed by the government of the Federated Malay States before World War II. When the formation of the Malay Regiment was first announced on 1 March 1933, its main aim was to replace the Indian battalion located at Taiping with locally trained Malay troops. This had been a long-term desire of the Sultans in the Federated Malay States, i.e. to use local troops for the defence of the homeland.

Although the British had been recruiting Malays since 1874 as policemen and volunteers, the establishment of a regular Malay military unit took them a long while to decide. The British colonial administrators were reluctant and cautious about arming and training local Malays for regular units. Their apprehension was partly due to the belief that the Malays, with their leisurely temperament and lack of military traditions other than those of guerrilla warfare, were unsuitable for strict military discipline. But more importantly, the British were worried that the well-trained and well-armed Malays might be involved in rivalries among Malay chiefs for power and control of the lucrative tin-mining areas which were widespread in the Malay states. It was only in 1933 that the British finally changed their minds mainly because of the high costs of hiring the Burma Rifles from India. Hence, the Federal Council of Federated Malay States eventually passed the Malay Regiment Bill on 23 January 1933.<sup>6</sup>

Under the Malay Regiment's proposal announced on 1 March 1933, the total number of the first batch of recruits was only 25. This was supposed to be a "Experimental Company" created to find out how the Malays would react to military discipline and if they could be made into good regular soldiers. The first 25 recruits of the Malay Regiment were men carefully selected from over a thousand applications. The subsequent recruitment exercise was carried out by the district officers with the assistance of the local headmen. The final choice was made by the Regiment Selection Board comprising the Commanding Officer, accompanied by one other officer, a prominent Malay of the state and the regimental doctor.

Enlistment was at first restricted to the four Federated Malay States which bore the cost of the expenditure for the Malay Regiment. But it was soon extended to all the states except Johore (which had its own military units) to project a Malayan composition. Recruits from non-Malay states, however, were not to exceed 20% of the force.<sup>7</sup>

The British appointed MAJ G. Mcl S. Bruce to be the first Commanding Officer. MAJ Bruce was a wise and liberal officer. Although all military commands were in English, Malay was used widely for instructions. Bruce realised that this arrangement would assist many non-English educated Malays in their learning and it could thus train as many non-commissioned Malay officers to staff the new regiment as possible. British officers from the Commanding Officer downwards were expected to learn Malay and subsequently to know something about Malay customs and the Muslim religion. MAJ Bruce, for instance, took a short Malay language course. In addition, there was also the appointment of a regimental religious teacher in the unit.<sup>8</sup>

Competitions were held frequently to get the best out of the men on parade and in the field. The instructors also aimed at developing in the Malay soldiers a sense of patriotism, a love for their country and loyalty to their rulers. Special attention was paid to food, social recreation and the general welfare of the soldiers.

In keeping the name "Malay Regiment", efforts were made to retain the distinctive Malay character. MAJ Bruce conceived the idea of a Regimental mufti embodying the Malay national dress. He argued that for *esprit de corps*, British personnel serving in the regiment had to wear the Malay Regiment uniform which would identify them from the onset with the Malay Regiment rather than with their own British units. A regimental badge was created containing the motto: "Ta'at dan Setia" (loyal and true).<sup>9</sup> Three regimental colours were chosen for the regiment. They were green representing Islam, yellow for Malay royalty, and red for British army. These unique uniform, motto and regimental colours were well accepted by members of the unit. As expected, the Malay soldiers responded "extremely well" and serious breaches of discipline were rare, according to its Commanding Officer. The high standard of training, sensitive and matured management must have contributed greatly to its special quality.<sup>10</sup>

The basic regimental training was conducted at Port Dickinson base and in other Malay states. It was only in 1937 that the regiment came down to Singapore for advanced training, and took part in one of the biggest inter-service combined operations.<sup>11</sup> The performance of the Malay Regiment was so impressive that there was a call by the locals to establish a similar regular regiment in Singapore.<sup>12</sup>

In January and February 1938, the Malay Regiment once again came to Singapore to conduct battalion and advanced training. In addition, a contingent of fifty men attended the opening of King George VI's Graving Dock at the Singapore Naval Base.<sup>13</sup>

The "Experimental Company" was thus a success. On 1 January 1935, it officially assumed the title of the Malay Company with a strength of 150 men. From there, the strength of the Malay Regiment increased rapidly. By October 1938, it started to form a battalion comprising three rifle coys with one machine-gun support coy and a battalion headquarters. On 1<sup>st</sup> December 1941, the second battalion of the Malay Regiment was formed but this happened only about six days before the Japanese forces landed at Singora, Pattani and Kota Bharu. Thus, the second battalion might not have enjoyed the quality and cohesiveness of the first.

During the Malayan Campaign, units of the Malay Regiment were deployed in various parts of the Malay Peninsula. However, it was in the Battle of Singapore, and in the defence of Pasir Panjang Ridge, that the Malay Regiments confronted the Japanese troops head-on. It was in this battle that its units fought magnificently but suffered heavy casualties.

## Battle of Pasir Panjang Ridge

In the Battle of Pasir Panjang, one name keeps cropping up that has since come to personify the meaning of patriotism and dying for one's country. The young 2LT that led one the platoons of the C Coy in the 1<sup>st</sup> Malay Regiment against the Japanese troops was 2LT Adnan Saidi.

2LT Saidi was born in 1915 in Kajang, Selangor. He received his education in Pekan Sunei Ramal in English. Upon graduation, Adnan was chosen to be a trainee teacher and taught at Pekan Sunei Ramal for a year. In 1933, when he was 18 years old, he joined the Malay Regiment. He was the best recruit for the intake. In 1936, he was promoted to the rank of sergeant. In the following year, he was chosen to represent his platoon in a military parade in London to honour the ascension of King George VI to the throne. Shortly thereafter, Adnan Saidi was promoted yet again to coy-sergeant-major and headed for Singapore for an officer conversion course. Upon graduation as a 2<sup>nd</sup> lieutenant, he became the commander of 7<sup>th</sup> Platoon, C Coy of the 1<sup>st</sup> Malay Regiment.

Following the successful crossing of the Straits of Johore, forces of the Japanese 25<sup>th</sup> moved rapidly towards the central and southern coastal area of Singapore. By 13 February 1942, two days before the British surrendered to the Japanese, Percival ordered the establishment of a new city perimeter (see Map 1 overleaf)<sup>14</sup>. The final line stretched from Kallang, through Woodleigh, then Thomson Village, MacRitchie Reservoir, Adam Road, Tanglin Halt, and from there to Pasir Panjang. The new defence perimeter cut the supply of rations down to a week and reduced stocks of mortar and artillery ammunition to dangerously low levels. Water supply was also a grave problem. The whole city was now within easy range of enemy guns, and the water distribution system started to collapse.

An even greater source of concern was the morale of the British soldiers. Most of the units had by now grasped how close they were to disaster. MG Bennett, who was commanding the Australian forces, decided on his own to form his division into an all-round perimeter to guard its own flanks and rear for a final battle. But the Australian units had been badly rocked, prompting real concern over how many men remained under command.<sup>15</sup> Such concerns were rising over the Indian and British troops as well.

The 1<sup>st</sup> Malay Bde comprised two Malay Regiments, and was reinforced by 5<sup>th</sup> Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire (less two coys) from 18<sup>th</sup> Division as well as an engineer battalion formed from British and Indian engineer units. It formed part of defence perimeter along the junction of West Coast Road and Pasir Panjang Road.

The first battle between the Malay Regiment and Japanese soldiers occurred on 13 February at around 1400 hrs.<sup>16</sup> The Japanese 18<sup>th</sup> Division started to attack the south-western coast along the Pasir Panjang ridge and astride of Raja Road. The Japanese 56<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, supported by a considerable force of artillery, attacked the ridge during the morning. One of the units defending the line was the B Coy of the Malay Regiment. Under the heavy fire of the Japanese troops supported by artillery and tanks, the B Coy was forced to retreat to the rear. But before all of them could retreat, the Japanese army succeeded in breaking through B Coy's position. In the battle, B Coy troops fought hand-to-hand combat using bayonets against the Japanese. A few from B Coy managed to save themselves while others were caught as prisoners-of-war. This penetration led to the withdrawal after dark of both 44<sup>th</sup> Indian and 1<sup>st</sup> Malay Bde to the general line Mount Echo (junction of Raja and Depot Road) Buona Vista (see Map 2 overleaf).

## Battle of Opium Hill

On 14<sup>th</sup> February, the Japanese again launched a heavy attack at 0830 hours, supported by intense mortar and artillery fire, on the front held by the 1<sup>st</sup> Malay Bde. The defenders beat off this and a number of other attacks. The fighting included bitter hand-to-hand combat, and losses from both sides were heavy. At 1600 hours an attack supported by tanks eventually succeeded in penetrating the left, and the defenders on this flank were forced back to a line from the junction of the Ayer Rajar and Depot Road through the Brick Works and along the canal to Bukit Chermin. Owing to the failure of units on both its flanks to hold their ground, the 1<sup>st</sup> Malay Bde withdrew at 1430 hours. It was at this point that C Coy of the Malay Regiment received instructions to move to a new defence position Pt. 226, Opium Hill.

Opium Hill or Bukit Chandu in Malay was named after an opium-processing factory located at the foot of the hill. This was also where C Coy of the Malay Regiment made their final stand against the Japanese attack. Opium Hill was a key defence position for two important reasons. It was situated on high ground overlooking the island to the north; and secondly, if the Japanese gained control of the ridge, it gave them direct passage to the Alexandra area. The British army had its main ammunition and supply depots, military hospital and other key installations located in the Alexandra area.

C Coy's position was separated from D Coy by a big canal. Oil was burning in the canal, which flowed from Normanton Depot. The burning oil prevented C Coy soldiers from retreating further south. C Coy was under the command of CPT Rix, a brave and daring British officer. CPT Rix encouraged the soldiers to defend Opium Hill down to the last soldier. His bravery was exemplified in the battle and he was killed together with many of his Malay Regiment soldiers in the last defence battle at Pasir Panjang.

The Japanese troops pressed their attack on Opium Hill in the afternoon but under the guise of a deception. They sent a group of soldiers, dressed in Punjabi uniforms, passing themselves off as Punjabi soldiers from the British army. C Coy saw through this trick as they knew that the Punjabi soldiers of the British army usually marched in a line of three whereas the Japanese disguised Punjabi soldiers were in a line of four. When the disguised soldiers reached the Malay Regiment's defence line, C Coy's squad opened fire on them with their Lewis machine guns. Some of the Japanese troops were killed and the rest badly wounded. Those who survived rolled and crawled downhill to save themselves.

Two hours later, the Japanese launched an all-out assault in great numbers. The attack overwhelmed the strength of the Malay Regiment. Greatly outnumbered and short of ammunition and supplies, the Malay Regiment continued to resist the Japanese troops. All kinds of arms such as grenades, small arms and bayonets were used by troops of the Malay Regiment. It was reported that 2LT Adnan handled a Lewis machine gun against the Japanese troops. Some soldiers engaged in fierce hand-to-hand combat using bayonets. Yet, they stood their ground frustrating their enemy. In the ensuing battle, men and officers fell. 2LT Adnan was seriously wounded but he refused to retreat and instead encouraged his men to fight to the last. It was this disregard of danger that inspired the coy to stand up gallantly.

Mubin Sheppard, an ex-officer and former POW, had this to say about his friend, the late 2LT Adnan,

*"he was heavily outnumbered by the Japanese they bombed him but he fought on fiercely and inflicted heavy losses on them. Adnan would have never surrendered under any circumstances. He was absolutely dedicated. In fact, just before fighting, he adopted a motto for his platoon, "biar putih tulang, jangan putih mata" (death before dishonour).*

Corporal Yaakob, who won a Medal of Gallant after the war, was one of the few who survived Opium Hill. During the chaos of the battle, he fell and landed on top of the bodies of the dead soldiers. He escaped death by lying motionless among the pile of bodies and witnessed the gruesome death of Adnan Saidi. He said that the resistance of the Malay Regiment angered the Japanese, and when they captured 2LT Adnan, they dragged and pushed him into a gunnysack. The Japanese soldiers then hung him by his legs on a cherry tree and then bayoneted him again and again. His throat was slit repeatedly. Even after the battle, no one was allowed to bring his body for burial. No one dared.

Another eyewitness, Burhan Muslim, who had lived along Bukit Chandu, recalled going up the hill with his cousin a few days after the battle. In one of the white bungalows that stood on the hill at Pepys Lane, he saw the dismembered bodies of Malay soldiers everywhere. In one of the rooms laid the body of a Malay soldier. His throat had been slit several times. His uniform was soaked with blood. Judging from the badges he had on his uniform, Burhan believed that he was an officer. He felt that the body could have been that of 2LT Adnan Saidi.<sup>17</sup>

For the entire Malayan Campaign, but largely on 12, 13 and 14 February 1942 in Singapore, the Malay Regiment suffered a total of 159 killed (six British officers, seven Malay officers, and 146 other ranks) and a large but unspecified number wounded.<sup>18</sup>

## Conclusion

From a purely military operational perspective, the Battle of Pasir Panjang had little significance. The battle could not change the outcome of the fate of Singapore and it was a matter of time before the British would surrender to the Japanese 25<sup>th</sup> Army. Those who look at only the tactical significance, however, will miss a very important lesson. The Battle of Pasir Panjang, and the Battle of Opium Hill in particular, manifested the acme of the fighting spirit in battle. In the words of Noel Barber, the author of *Sinister Twilight*, the Malay Regiment was described thus:

*"A regular, locally raised unit, commanded by Malay-speaking British officers, it was a living and dying illustration of the folly of not having raised more such local forces before the war in which men could defend what was their homeland."*<sup>19</sup>

And as Percival noted, the Malay Regiment:

*"showed what esprit de corps and discipline can achieve. Garrisons of posts held their ground and many of them were wiped out almost to a man."*<sup>20</sup>

The 48-hour Battle of Pasir Panjang put up by men and officers of the Malay Regiment exemplified the highest form of "duty, honour and country" that soldiers can show in war. The courage, bravery, and sacrifice to defend Singapore island despite the foregone defeat of British forces will always remain one of the highlights in the story of the Battle of Singapore.

## Endnotes

1 Goh Chin Lian, "Stories of Duty, Honour, Courage", *The Straits Times*, 27 Dec 2001 and 7 February 2002.

2 Woodburn S. Kirby, *Singapore: The Chain of Disaster*, London: Cassell, 1971, p. 244; and *War Against Japan*, Vol. 1, Chapter XXIV, p. 414.

3 M. C. Sheppard, *The Malay Regiment, 1937-1947*, Kuala Lumpur, 1947, preface; Dol Ramli, "History of Malay Regiment, 1933-42", Academic Exercise, Department of History, University of Singapore, 1955, p. 104.

4 See for example, Masanobu Tsuji, *Japan's Great Victory, Britain's Worst Defeat*, New York: Sarpedon, 1993;

5 See, for example, M.C. Sheppard, *op cit.*; Dol Ramli, "History of Malay Regiment, 1933-42"; Wan Hashim Haji Wan Teh, *Perang Dunia Kedua: Peranan Askar Melayu*, Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kementerian Pendidikan, Malaysia, 1993.

6 Dol Ramli, *op.cit.*, p.19.

7 *Malay Regiment War Diary*, p. 81. Cited in Dol Rmli, p. 24.

8 *Ibid*, p. 27.

9 Sheppard, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

10 *Ibid*, p.28.

11 *The Straits Times*, 13 January 1937, cited in Dol Ramli, p. 41.

12 A letter by a Eurasian appeared in *The Strait Times* suggesting the Colonial Government set up a Eurasian Regiment in Singapore. *The Strait Times*, 23 January 1937.

13 Dol Ramli, *op.cit.*, p. 42.

14 See Krby, *The War Against Japan*, Vol. I, pp. 400-415.

15 See for example, Peter Elphick, *The Pregnable Fortress: A Study in Deception, Discord and Desertion*, Great Britain: Hodder and Stoughton, 1995.

16 Extracted from Wan Hashim Haji Wan Teh, *Perang Dunia Kedua: Peranan Askar Melayu*, Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kementerian Pendidikan, Malaysia, 1993, pp.107-113. I would like to thank Ms Rozita of SAFTI Library for her assistance in translating some of the Malay text.

17 Account came from one of C Coy members CPT Din who witnessed the incident. Later they were stabbed by bayonets and left behind for dead. See Wan Hashim Haji Wan Teh, *Perang Dunia Kedua: Peranan Askar Melayu*, pp. 111-3.

18 Dol Ramli, "History of Malay Regiment, 1933-42", pp. 104-5.

19 Noel Barber, *Sinister Twilight: The Fall of Singapore*, Great Britain: William Collins Sons & Co, 1968, p. 303.

20 A.E. Percival, *The War in Malaya*, New Delhi: Sagar Publications, 1971, p. 291.



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Last updated: 18-Jul-2005

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